The Anomalous Character of Experience

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According to Davidson, only beliefs can justify other beliefs. Arguing otherwise would mean falling into the Myth of the Given, the idea that we can separate the world's contribution to our mental states from our own conceptual contribution. McDowell has objected that all Davidson is left with are causal connections with the world, which could explain, but not justify, our beliefs, and our aim at truth. If experience were just an extra-conceptual impact, it would be outside the space of reasons (of justifications). A consequence of this is that our network of beliefs lacks any external constraint. Davidson finds himself in this situation, McDowell argues, because he has not being sensitive enough to the motivations behind embracing the myth. The solution is to go all the way and to accept that experience is already inside the conceptual network. By having concepts already operating in our sensibility, and by realizing that these conceptual capacities are subject to self-criticism and modification as they belong to our more abstract cognitive universe as well, experience can also play the role that is needed to serve as justification for our beliefs. So, we concede to Davidson that beliefs cannot be justified from outside the realm of reason, but experience does not need to be outside that realm.

It should be a consequence of Davidson's rejection of 'stimulus meaning', of his application of the principle of charity "across the board", that such a principle is applied to people's interacting with their environment through action, thought *and* experience. However, when it comes to experience, he seems to limit the application of the principle to the relation between the speaker and her sensory stimulation. But, is this rejecting the notion of stimulus meaning, or rather taking it too seriously? Why cannot Davidson apply the principle of charity, not just to beliefs, but also to conceptual perceptual episodes?

This extension has an added advantage. While Davidson's use of the principle of charity can be accused of verificationism given its insistence on the understanding of interpretation in terms of translation into the interpreter's system of beliefs, a rendering of charity that accepts the rational value of experience, opens up for him the possibility of other people's experiences and placings in the world being incorporated to the interpreter's own: "When the specific character of her thinking starts to come into view for us, we are (...) coming to share with her a standpoint *within* a system of concepts, a standpoint from which we can join her in directing a shared attention at the world, without needing to break out through a boundary that encloses the system of concepts" (McDowell 1994, 35f.). Truth dwells in this communion of meanings, unlike Davidson's projectionist reading of charity, in which any matching of world-views rests on the truth-conditions of the interpreter's beliefs.

If we take Davidsonian interpretation seriously, and if we allow for the subvenient base of the mind to include the interpretee's environment (i.e., if we take seriously that meanings are not in the head), we should extend anomalous monism all the way. Davidson defends the idea that two kinds of stories can be told about the world. One of them, the interpretative one, talks about people and public objects and it is normative and anomalous. The other, the causal one, comes after, and talks about organisms, atoms, and sensory irritations. The second is merely descriptive while the first is justificatory. The world both causes and justifies our beliefs because we can talk about the world in the vocabulary of natural science and of natural language.

Davidson is happy with keeping separate our understanding of something placed in the nomological space of the natural sciences and of something placed in the space of reasons. Is the world left out of the space of reasons? McDowell thinks that it is. However, in a restricted sense, it is not. Davidson has no doubts about accounting for interpretation against the background of a public world, one which is organized and structured in terms of the ability to use a public language shared by interpreter and interpretee. The world, inasmuch as it plays this role in Davidson's theory of interpretation, is also subject to rational description. But, why have mental states and worldly states belonging to two kinds of description while demanding experience to be restricted to only one? How can both the rational and the causal aspects of the world pass through the bottleneck of sensation which, for Davidson, resonates only to the causal ones?

The anomalousness of the mental is accompanied by an anomalousness of the world, because the world (the *public* world) is not fixed independently of the rational connections which make communication possible. Sensory impressions could therefore be described from both vocabularies: *qua* physical events they are as blind as brain states or light-waves, but *qua* mental events they are appearances, and can be part of our world-views. What I am suggesting is that, in parallel to recognizing the brain as the physical enabling condition of the mind (without identifying them in any way), we can recognize a similar role for impacts in our nerve endings as enabling conditions for experience, without establishing one-to-one identifications. The latter impacts do occur (roughly) in the skin, but experiences do not. (Brain activity occurs in the brain, thought does not.) Experiences, like thoughts, have content, and contents are aspects of states of the world, which is on both sides of the skin. Nothing goes against telling a scientific story about the causal interactions of physical features of the world with physical features of the nervous system, with the skin as a border. But nothing motivates the position which divides the self, the world, and experience in parallel with the physical story, besides faith in scientism.

Awareness seems to be an important issue here. Davidson writes:

> "Emphasis on sensation or perception in epistemological matters springs from the obvious thought: sensations are what connect the world and our beliefs, and they are candidates for justifiers because we are often aware of them. The trouble (...) is that the justification seems to depend on the awareness which is just another belief." (1986, 311)

Davidson, unlike McDowell, thinks that consciousness does not extend as far as sensations. This extension of consciousness, of the conceptual, allows McDowell to say that experience can play a justificatory, and not merely causal, role. However, why should the objects of consciousness be exclusively conceptual, i.e., why cannot conscious states have contents that are not subject to the

constraint of the normative and justificatory role reserved for conceptual content? Davidson's strongest argument against conceding a justificatory role to experience is that justification depends on awareness which is another belief. But granting him that experience cannot be thought of simultaneously as something given independently of any conceptual scheme and as something that plays a rational role, i.e., granting that experiences cannot be both independent of world-views and justificatory of them, is not granting that they cannot be justificatory of them. Rejecting the first conjunct is enough to do justice to Davidson's point. One wonders what independent motivation Davidson has to ignore this incorporation of experience to the rational network, besides the unquestioned naturalism which remains in Davidson's work after his criticism of Quine's. One suggestion is to extend Davidson's anomalousness from thought and the world to experience along the following lines: sensations are only causal intermediaries between our system of beliefs and the world. They cannot play a justificatory role; our beliefs are not about them. What our beliefs are about is events and objects in the world. Nevertheless, the world can be seen under two different descriptions which cannot be nomologically linked, given that one of them is not subject to nomological, but to interpretative and rational constraints. And from such an approach events are conceptual, rational, and holistic. The world, as a whole, serves both as a cause of our beliefs, and as justification. Brute impingements on our nervous system as well as perceptions can also be accommodated in this reading: the former are captured by nomological nets (given by neurophysiology and physics) while the latter are understood within a rational network (given by psychology understood as a humanistic and interpretative enterprise).

The former role is played by the world described by the natural sciences. The latter role is played by the intersubjective world, "reached out" by triangulation, in Davidson's metaphor (cf. Davidson 1982, 326f.). According to Davidson, to arrive at the idea of a world we need to be interpreters, and objectivity emerges from the comparison of points of view. This world is rational, because we have it from our primordial interpretative (pragmatic) standpoint. This standpoint is ineliminable and prior to any theoretical enterprise. Davidson insists on the rational, anomalous and holistic character of the mental, but he leaves out the fact that the mental embraces the world, and that the world, under this description, is also rational, anomalous and holistic. This is why an extension of anomalous monism to experience yields a kind of anomalous event dualism. This second label makes explicit the most disruptive consequence for Davidson: the need to give up a token-identity theory between mental events and physical events, a need for which I have argued elsewhere (Pinedo 2004). We can retain the aspiration that our interpretative and our nomological stories should be about the same reality, by avoiding a sharp separation between rational discourse and science. But this monism only works at the holistic level. It makes no sense to apply it to particular events. This is why substance monism is not incompatible with methodological dualism/pluralism. The alternative to materialism and dualism that this suggests ultimately rests on replacing the ontological perspective for a hermeneutical, interpretative and practical one. By giving up 'mind' as the central concept in the philosophy of mind in favour of that of 'person' we can escape the temptations of materialist monism and of dualism. The difficulties that both traditional theories have should be enough to motivate such a 'personological' perspective.

From Davidson we learn that mental characteristics cannot be reduced to physical ones. He has done a lot to avoid a reification of beliefs and meanings which would stimulate this kind of reductionism. However, Davidson retains the idea that mental or rational characteristics are realized or instantiated in well-defined physical entities, such as neural states. The extension of anomalous monism (which I have argued follows from his interpretative stance) makes this "narrow" identification difficult to comprehend. It is the whole mind that comes to view when we make sense of a creature, and particular beliefs or desires are only ascribed in a tentative (indeterminate, Davidson would say) way, i.e., in a way that makes them explanatorily interesting insofar as they carry with them a world-view *and a world*. But, considering that for him there is no Given, no independent facts, or objects, or worlds, how does the world enter the world-view?

Both, the argument against Davidson's token-identity theory and the recommendation to incorporate to experience the dual aspect (causal and rational) that Davidson is happy to concede to mind and reality stem from the following thought. Davidson gives two readings of his attack on the third dogma: one of them criticizes the separation of concepts and naked sensations. The second rejects the divorce between world-views or schemes and the universe. But, while he takes the first reading too seriously, he does not take the second seriously enough. From the first he derives the idea that our sensory interface with the world can only be causal if we want to avoid something external to our concepts justifying our picture of the world. This is too radical a retreat. After all, mental states can also be physical. The common, public objects of the world which "emerge" in our interpretation and, hence, are undetached from our rational framework are surely also physical. Why are seeings and hearings and feelings refused a place in our rational understanding of people? Why cannot our interpretative net try to capture the phenomenal aspects of someone's mental life?

Finally, Davidson is not radical enough with respect to the consequences of his second reading of the dismissal of the third dogma. This is shown in his attempt to stealthily introduce identities between mental events and physical events even though there is no place in our world-view for objects to have both rational and nomological sides. Semantics and epistemology are not independent enterprises for Davidson: meaning and belief go hand in hand. However, it is not just against the experiential given or content that Davidson's criticism is directed. The dualism under criticism is the dualism "of organizing system and something waiting to be organized (...)" (Davidson 1974, 189). The supposedly given entities waiting to be organized do not need to be experiences: "As for the entities that get organized (...) we may detect two main ideas: either it is reality (the universe, the world, nature), or it is experience (the passing show, surface irritations, sensory promptings, sense-data, the given)" (*ibid.*, pp.191-2). The rejection of the third dogma is the rejection of a separation between concepts and empirical contents, and a rejection of the separation of reality from concepts. Semantics leads to epistemology and epistemology leads to metaphysics. Once he admits that ontological matters cannot be established independently of knowledge, it seems unjustified to claim that only the objects and events picked up by the rational vocabulary are subject to the model which connects them. Mental events are holistic, but this alone does not make them more dependent on the framework where they belong than physical events and objects are with respect to the scientific model that relates them. Davidson is not entitled

to a stronger form of realism towards the physical than he is towards the mental. And, finally, the identities which he infers from his argument for anomalous monism do not fit any of our conceptual devices. Davidson is defenceless against the accusation that such identities must be noumenal. However, that there cannot be noumenal objects, or events, or characteristics, or whatever, is the point that the rejection of the scheme/content dualism makes.

Literature

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